

Blacksburg, VA.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF A BLACK RAIL (*LATERALLUS JAMAICENSIS*) TERRITORY IN HUNTLEY MEADOWS, FAIRFAX COUNTY, VIRGINIA.—The Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) is a rare breeding species in brackish and salt marshes in the Chesapeake Bay watershed (Robbins & Blom, 1997; Rottenborn & Brinkley, 2007). Occasional inland reports (May-July) suggest sporadic breeding in freshwater marshes although nesting has yet to be documented. The most celebrated Virginia record in recent memory occurred during the summer of 2002, when Kurt Gaskill discovered a singing male on 10 June in the non-tidal freshwater wetlands of Huntley Meadows County Park (HMCP), Fairfax County (Iliff, 2002; Rottenborn & Brinkley, 2007). Observation notebooks archived at HMCP indicate that the rail was reported on at least 21 days from 11 June through 13 July 2002. Although this was the first record of Black Rail in Fairfax County and among only a handful of inland records for Virginia during the past 50 years (Rottenborn & Brinkley, 2007), no documentation was submitted because the Avian Records Committee of the Virginia Society of Ornithology did not require documentation for this species at the time from Coastal Plain localities. The purpose of this note is to present a brief description of the habitat frequented by the rail and notes on its behavior.

I mapped the rail's territory on seven days, 22 June to 4 July, by tracking its vocalizations from the elevated boardwalk that winds across the floodplain of Barnyard Run with a global positioning system (GPS) receiver. The rail frequented a roughly circular area of marsh (ca.



Fig. 1. Stands of lizard's-tail (foreground) and cattail frequented by a Black Rail in Huntley Meadows County Park, Fairfax County, Virginia, from 10 June to 13 July 2002.

0.47 ha) centered inside the boardwalk loop (38°45.24' N, 77°6.28' W). The areas of greatest singing frequency were dominated by thick monocultures of lizard's-tail (*Saururus cernuus*) and scattered patches of cattail (*Typha latifolia*) growing on mud or in shallow water (<5 cm) pooled behind a meandering series of low beaver dams (Fig. 1). Approximately 10% of the territory was covered by pools of open water or exposed mud. The water level in the territory was relatively stable, varying by no more than a few centimeters, during the observation period.

I recorded the rail's vocalizations with a Marantz PMD430 cassette recorder and a Sennheiser ME 80 directional microphone (Fig. 2). The rail delivered the "keekee-doo" song and shorter "kee-doo" variants intermittently from dawn (0515 h) until dusk (1945 h). Both song variants are believed to be given by males (Eddleman et al., 1994). Singing bouts typically lasted

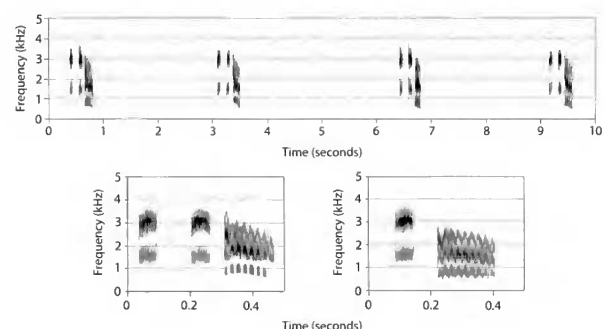


Fig. 2. Audio spectrograms of Black Rail songs recorded at Huntley Meadows County Park, Fairfax County, Virginia, on 3 July 2002. Upper panel shows the temporal spacing of "keekee-doo" songs during a typical singing bout. Spectrographic detail of the first song in the series is shown in the lower left panel. An example of the "kee-doo" song variant is shown in the lower right panel.

several minutes (as long as 13 minutes) followed by silent periods of variable length (few minutes to several hours). The song rate counted during three 1-minute periods was 16, 17, and 19 songs per minute. The rail appeared to be little affected by the presence of observers on the boardwalk. On several occasions it walked under the boardwalk during singing bouts. The presumed male was probably unmated because there was no evidence of additional birds. It apparently departed the area in mid-July, as repeated attempts to relocate the bird in late July and August were unsuccessful.

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- HUMMINGBIRDS VISIT FEEDERS AT HIGH-RISE APARTMENT BUILDINGS.** — Many species of birds have shown a remarkable ability to adapt to anthropogenic habitats (Graves, 2004) and adjust their foraging behavior to take advantage of novel food sources (Fisher & Hinde, 1949; Martin & Fitzgerald, 2005). No taxonomic group demonstrates this better than hummingbirds (Trochiliformes), which rapidly learn to visit sugar-water feeders. However, the extent to which hummingbirds exploit artificial food resources in high-density urban environments is largely undocumented. A review of peer-reviewed literature revealed no reports of hummingbirds visiting feeders at high-rise apartment buildings.
- Here I report Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (*Archilochus colubris*) visiting sugar-water feeders at a high-rise apartment building in College Park, Prince George County, Maryland. It was brought to my attention that hummingbirds had visited feeders and potted plants on the upper balconies from May through September, 2011. The apartment resident contacted me again in June 2012 to report that hummingbirds were visiting the same balcony feeders. I visited the apartment complex on 26 July 2012 and observed two hummingbirds visiting feeders on balconies on the 14th and 15th floors (Fig. 1). The highest feeder was 43 m above ground level (measured with a Bushnell laser range finder). Both individuals were observed trap-lining among feeders, potted plants, and hanging baskets scattered among the balconies of the upper floors of the apartment complex. A few direct flights from the balconies to the adjacent forest and vice versa were observed but hummingbirds mostly perched on balcony trellises between foraging bouts. In one case, a departing individual was observed flying over the building (~50 m above ground level). A walk around the two high-rise buildings, both of which were comprised of 16 floors, revealed hummingbird feeders on six different balconies (two each on the 15th and 14th floors and one each on the 13th and 12th floors). Feeders were of similar design with red "nectar" receptacles. The nearest natural habitat, a relatively large tract of deciduous forest (>200 ha), was ~60-70 m from the apartment buildings.
- These observations raise an interesting question: How do hummingbirds discover high-rise feeders? Red plastic feeders probably act as visual beacons. The spectral sensitivity of hummingbird photoreceptors ranges from the near ultraviolet (~350 nm) through red wavelengths (~700 nm) of the visual spectrum (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 1979; Goldsmith, 1980; Herrera, et al., 2008). However, most ornithophilous plants in North America have red or orange flowers (Grant, 1966; Grant & Grant, 1968). Two climbing lianas in the middle Atlantic states, trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*) and cross vine (*Bignonia capreolata*), have large reddish-orange flowers, or red and yellow flowers (5-7 cm) that are primarily pollinated by the Ruby-throated Hummingbird